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## **Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Fariña and Richard Fariña**

David Hajdu

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001

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*A Simple Twist of Fate* might have been a more appropriate title for this book, which is essentially a biography of Richard Fariña in disguise. But it is more than that. As entwined as any Dylan epic song, it is a look at crazy poet/hustler conmen conniving their way to the top; a behind-the-scenes

glimpse of the folk scene of the '60s; a tale of four lovers; a rivalry of two sisters; and a competition between two writers.

In a sense, Richard Fariña was the embodiment of the '60s. Undeniably brilliant and a creative explosion waiting to happen, he was a myth-maker supreme, a charmer beyond compare, and a master manipulator. In reality, a kid from Flatbush, Brooklyn, of Cuban-Irish descent, Fariña had people believing he was a gun runner for the IRA and fought in the hills with Castro. The parallels with his Hibbing, Minnesota counterpart, whose stories of running away from home, working in carnivals, and hanging with blues singers, are clear. All this would be somewhat laughable, except as an artist Fariña delivered the goods. With less than 20 songs, he established himself as a major songwriter, pretty much blowing away all

the other folkie songwriters from Greenwich Village, and showed himself to be the only one working on the same poetic level as Dylan.

*Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street* begins with the sheltered childhood of Joan Baez and her younger sister Mimi, telling us more than we want or need to know. Structured almost like a play, various characters are introduced, some peripheral, some not. For some mysterious reason, Hajdu feels the need to describe in detail not only every residence Baez lived in but every room mentioned in the book. The only time it really works is when Fariña and Eric Von Schmidt, broke and scuffling, are crashing at an opulent residence in London, complete with an invisible butler. This attention to detail is extended to what people wore (that Fariña liked his jeans dry cleaned is mentioned often) and what brand of guitars they played. The last is rather humorous, because Hajdu gets it wrong, referring several times to Baez's Gibson and Dylan's Martin, when it was Baez who played a Martin and Dylan who played a Gibson.

More interesting are the almost incidental glances into the business side of the '60s folk scene. The blundering by musicians, managers, and record company executives is comical and sad, especially considering that the "folk community" then (and now) prides itself on not being interested in business. This is not presented as gossip or dirt but as what went down: Baez turned down Columbia Records for the low-key Vanguard and picked the more ethical Manny Greenhill to manage her, but only after she had the far more business-minded Albert Grossman negotiate her contract.

In a sense, this book is about three hustlers who would do whatever they had to for fame and success with Mimi Fariña emerging as heroine/victim. She was just 17 and still in high school when Fariña, at his romantic poet-rebel best, courted and secretly married her in France.

Baez was more reserved in her hustling, but the description of her debut at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival shows she was no slouch in the getting noticed department.

Not surprisingly, Dylan comes off as elusive. While he probably was every bit as manipulative as Fariña, like a true Mafia Don, he didn't get caught. Throughout the book, he appears and disappears, saying very little with the exception of a rather vicious attack on virtually every other songwriter near the book's conclusion. As Mitch Greenhill comments, "Dick was like 'Look at me—here I am. Dig Me!' Dylan was like, 'Look all you want you'll never see me.'"

As interesting as the four main characters are, drama and emotion are missing, and Hajdu is sometimes confusing. Describing Martin Carthy and Dylan spending New Year's Eve at a London club, he has Dylan stop singing "Auld Lang Syne" after the first line of the song, while Carthy wonders why Dylan stopped singing. In the very next paragraph, Hajdu writes: "While Dylan and Martin Carthy were bellowing 'Auld Lang Syne' Eric Von Schmidt was celebrating with a miniature bottle of bourbon on a BOAC flight to London." So was Dylan standing silent during the celebration or bellowing? A proofreader should have caught this.

While Hajdu succeeds in portraying Fariña as a domineering control freak who somehow charmed almost everyone he met into loving him, although not necessarily trusting him, the reader is left ambivalent. What should have been the book's great dramatic and tragic moment, Fariña's death in a motorcycle crash on the day his novel, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, was published as well as Mimi's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, leaves you feeling like "gee, that's too bad," despite Hajdu's careful building up to it.

Hajdu is at his best when, following Fariña's death, he writes, "Who reveled in the act of living more than this man who tried to make every meal a banquet, every task a mission, every conversation a play, every gathering a party?"

There's a great story here. Unlike many biographies, most of the accounts are believable. But, somehow, Hajdu—although he shows insight and makes the right connections—fails to make this book come alive.—Peter Stone Brown

